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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The Effect of Career Plateau on Chinese Employees' Affective Commitment: An Indigenous Career Plateau Scale and Two-Mediator Model

Abstract The two-dimensional (hierarchical and job content) model have been predominating the extant career plateau literature. However, based on Schein's cone-shaped organizational mobility model, we contend that stagnation in organizational centrality (inclusive plateau) may be another dimension of career plateau. Furthermore, grounded in social exchange theory and need-satisfaction models, we aim to examine the effects of career plateau on affective commitment and underlying mechanisms. In Study 1, based on a sample of 219 employees from different professions, we developed a primary validation of our three-dimensional career plateau scale. In Study 2, we examined our hypothesized model with another dataset of 288 employees. The results suggest that job satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between the job content plateau, the inclusive plateau and affective commitment. The analysis demonstrates that the specific indirect effect of job content plateauing and inclusion on affective commitment through intrinsic job satisfaction was greater than through extrinsic job satisfaction. However, the hypothesis regarding the relationship between hierarchical plateau and affective commitment was not supported, when another two dimensions of career plateau were added to the model. Our findings provide some theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords career plateau, three-factor structure, job satisfaction, affective commitment

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1 Introduction

In the past decade, when inevitable hierarchical career plateau (Allen, Potter and Russell, 1998; Baumol, Blinder and Wolff, 2003; Burke and Cooper, 2000) and boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) have been taken for granted among Western employees, career plateauing began to emerge as a challenging issue facing Chinese managers. In China, many companies have been undergoing radical management transformations in response to fierce competition in the global market and technological change. Consequently, they are striving to keep a flatter structure and leaner workforce, which means that employees need to stay in the same position longer and more candidates must compete for promotion. In contrast, upward hierarchical movement is still the predominant symbol of career success in Chinese society (Wen and Xiao, 2012) and with the labor force continually expanding at a high rate due to the popularization of higher education, the situation is exacerbated. To pursue individual development and career goals, many employees choose to leave the current organization and search for job alternatives. Therefore, it is imperative for Chinese managers to address the increasingly pervasive career plateau phenomenon to retain employees (Xie, 2013).

Initially, career plateau was defined as the point in career where further advancement in the hierarchy is less likely (Ference, Stoner and Warren, 1977), highlighting structural stagnation. Then, in an influential work, Bardwick (1986) added the job content plateau dimension that depicts job-related staleness resulting from the hierarchical plateau, giving rise to the widely accepted two-dimensional career plateau scale (Milliam, 1992). In essence, this classification is concurrent with a pyramid-shaped structure and the two dimensions correspond with vertical and lateral mobility in an organization. As an undesirable career experience, career plateauing has been conceptually and empirically demonstrated to be positively related to negative attitudes (Chao, 1990; Jung and Tak, 2008; Lapalme, Tremblay and Simard, 2009; Lentz and Allen, 2009; McCleese and Eby, 2006) and withdrawal, including intention to leave (Heilmann, Holt, and Rilovick, 2008; Lentz and Allen, 2009; Tremblay, Roger and Toulouse, 1995). In particular, recent years have seen a growing awareness of the dual-plateau phenomena (McCleese, Eby, Scharlau, and Hoffman, 2007; Mecleese and Eby, 2006).

In this paper, we aim to extend the existing literature in three ways. First, as

the two-dimensional career plateau scale was developed about 20 years ago (Milliman, 1992) and in Western culture, we intend to develop an indigenous career plateau scale for China to reflect organizational change and cultural differences. Schein (1971), in his cone-shaped organizational mobility model, noted that inclusion or centralization was another aspect of an employee's career devolvement within an organization, overlooked in career plateau literature. However, as Chinese society is known for high power distance and differentiated association, a centrality or inclusive plateau can be another dimension of career plateauing. Thus, we propose that career plateau in China consists of hierarchical, job content and inclusive plateaus. Second, the mediating effect of job satisfaction on the career plateau-affective commitment relationship will be examined in terms of underlying mechanisms. In spite of the considerable research efforts invested in examining the negative consequences of career plateaus (e.g., Foster, Lonial, and Shastri, 2011; Lentz and Allen, 2009; Salami, 2010; Tremblay and Roger, 2004), much less effort has focused on how the process takes place (Lapalme, Tremblay and Simard, 2009). In this paper, based on need-satisfaction models (Alderfer, 1977; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977), job satisfaction (e.g., intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction) is identified as a mediator. Third, we attempt to provide evidence for the impact of multiple career plateaus on individual outcomes in China, as employees may simultaneously experience multiple forms of career plateau, but few researchers have focused on multiple career plateaus in one study (McCleese et al., 2007; Mecleese and Eby, 2006; Lapalme, Tremblay and Simard, 2009). To address this gap, grounded in social exchange theory and need-satisfaction models, this research aims to distinguish different forms of career plateau and test their effects on affective commitment and its underlying mechanisms.

2 Hypothesis

2.1 Inclusive Plateau as an Additional Dimension of Career Plateau

Influenced by Bardwick (1986), the extant literature widely operationalizes career plateau as two dimensions, i.e., hierarchical plateau and job content plateau. Hierarchical plateau is defined as the point in an employee's career when future promotions are unlikely (Ference et al., 1977). Job content plateau is said to occur when work has been mastered and the job is no longer challenging

(Bardwick, 1986). Essentially, hierarchical plateau and job content plateau is equivalent to being plateaued vertically and horizontally, respectively (McCleese et al., 2007).

Schein (1971)'s three-dimension model suggested that an employee's career progress within an organization could be made three ways: (a) vertical movement which increased or decreased an employee's rank or level in the organization, (b) horizontal movement which changed an employee's function or division in the organization, and (c) inclusion or centrality. According to Schein, centrality refers to the extent to which employees are more or less "on the inside" in an organization. Employees are accepted as central people, as opposed to radial, in their organization when they have access to more important and sensitive information, greater power and authority, and greater discretion to make decisions. In a reflective article about the definition of career plateau, Feldman and Weitz (1988) observed that employees can be given new job titles, portrayed as promotions, but their responsibilities actually decrease (i.e., being kicked upstairs). Likewise, some employees may not be given new job titles, but their power and authority greatly increase. With the trend of flattened organizational structures, Feldman and Weitz's (1988) observations are becoming more relevant in China. An empirical study by O'Hara, Beehr and Colarelli (1994) also indicated that inclusion or centrality was a distinguishable dimension from vertical or horizontal movement within an organization. Taking into account Schein's (1971) cone model and relevant research (Feldman and Weitz, 1988; O'Hara, Beehr and Colarelli, 1994), we propose that employees not only may feel plateaued vertically (hierarchical plateaued) and horizontally (job content plateaued), but also may be plateaued inclusively (inclusive plateau). Within the present study, inclusive plateau is defined as the point in an employee's career when the likelihood of acquiring centrality has stalled.

Hypothesis 1: Career plateau is a three-dimension construct, and includes hierarchical plateau, job content plateau and inclusive plateau.

2.2 The Relationship between Career Plateau and Affective Commitment

Affective commitment refers to individuals' identification with their organizational membership, emotional attachment to the organization (Allen and

Meyer, 1996), and willingness to contribute to and remain with the organization (Somers, 1995). In essence, the organization and the employee are part of a social exchange relationship. The employee agrees to provide time and effort to the organization in return for rewards such as salary, job security, and career development (Grusky, 1966). Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972) proposed that employees' affective commitment was based on their perception of the balance of the exchange relationship between the employee and the organization. According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the more favorable the exchange as perceived by the employee, the greater the affective commitment to the organization. Meyer and Allen (1991) also noted that the emotional bond with the organization was profoundly influenced by their exchange with the organization.

The negative relation of hierarchical plateau and job content plateau to affective commitment has been established in the West (for a review, see Ismail, 2008). In the context of China, the research (e.g., Xie and Long, 2008; Bai, Lin, and Li, 2011; Chen and Li, 2009) also indicates that hierarchical plateau and job content plateau are negatively related to an employee's affective commitment. With regards to inclusive career plateau, we also hypothesize that there is a link between an inclusive plateau and an employee's affective commitment. The seminal work of O'Hara, Beehr and Colarelli (1994) found that organizational centrality was positively related to an employee's identification with his/her organizational membership, and emotional attachment to the organization. As well, the literature of career success indicates that organizational centrality can enhance an employee's positive career experience such as salary growth, work expectations and career satisfaction (Orpen, 1998), which, in turn, lead to increased affective commitment. Taken together, we postulate that career plateau is negatively related to Chinese employees' affective commitment.

Hypothesis 2a: Hierarchical plateau is negatively related to affective commitment.
Hypothesis 2b: Job content plateau is negatively related to affective commitment.
Hypothesis 2c: Inclusive plateau is negatively related to affective commitment.

2.3 The Mediation of Job Satisfaction

As mentioned above, the organization and the employee are in a reciprocal

relationship, and the parties fulfill their respective needs through a social exchange process. For the employee, one of his or her important needs is to obtain opportunities for career development in the organization, such as advancement, job skill enhancement, leverage, etc. Need-satisfaction models posit that individual attitudes and motivations result from the interaction of the need-fulfilling and frustrating properties of situations and individual need strengths. When the characteristics of the job are compatible with the employee's needs, he or she will be satisfied and this will lead to positive job attitudes and behaviors (e.g., affective commitment, organizational identity, work engagement, etc.). If the job has characteristics not compatible with the employee's needs, he or she will be not satisfied and have negative job attitudes and behaviors (Alderfer, 1977; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977).

The evidence from empirical studies also supports the mediation of job satisfaction in the relation of career plateau to affective commitment. Previous research on career plateau has established the negative relationship between career plateau and job satisfaction. For instance, a study by Allen et al. (1998) indicated hierarchically and job content plateaued employees tended to report less job satisfaction. Lee (2002) also found evidence for the hierarchical and job content plateaus to be negative associated with job satisfaction. As far as the relationship between job satisfaction and affective commitment, a meta-analysis by Meyer et al. (2002) found job satisfaction was significantly correlated with affective commitment.

According to Weiss, Davis, England and Lofquist (1967), job satisfaction has been conceptualized and operationalized as a two-dimension construct that includes extrinsic and intrinsic job satisfaction. Extrinsic satisfaction refers to satisfaction with aspects of the work situation that are external to the job tasks or work itself, such as pay, working conditions and co-workers. Intrinsic satisfaction refers to satisfaction with aspects that have to do with the job tasks or content of the work itself, such as variety, skill utilization, autonomy. Though there is lack of empirical evidence for the mediating role of extrinsic and intrinsic satisfaction in the career plateau-affective commitment association, need-satisfaction models (Alderfer, 1977; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977) theoretically support our proposition that extrinsic and intrinsic satisfaction mediate the relationship between career plateau and affective commitment (see Fig.1). Drawing from the combination of the above arguments, we hypothesize

that:

Hypothesis 3a: Job satisfaction (i.e., extrinsic and intrinsic satisfaction) mediates the relationship between hierarchical plateau and affective commitment.
Hypothesis 3b: Job satisfaction (i.e., extrinsic and intrinsic satisfaction) mediates the relationship between job content plateau and affective commitment.
Hypothesis 3c: Job satisfaction (i.e., extrinsic and intrinsic satisfaction) mediates the relationship between inclusive plateau and affective commitment.

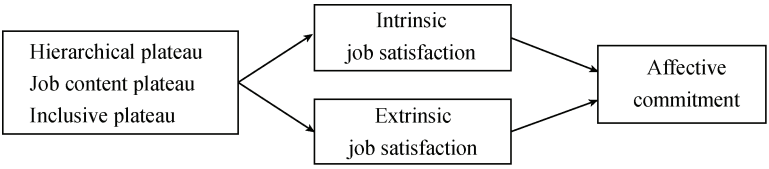

Fig. 1 Hypothesized Model

3 Study 1

3.1 Item Generation and Review

The goal of the first study was to develop and validate our new three-dimension career plateau. An iterative process of reviewing the literature and field interviews yielded an initial pool of 52 career plateau items. First, we drew on literature on the career plateau scale (Millian, 1992) and organizational centrality scale (O'Hara, Beehr and Colarelli, 1994). Second, we utilized field data from interviewees. A semi-structured questionnaire incorporating each dimension was designed, requiring participants to give 3–5 instances for each dimension. Considering knowledge necessary for career plateau, 20 students majoring in human resource management or MBAs were asked to develop the instrument and give examples for each dimension.

Following DeVellis' (2003) recommendations, we asked a panel of experts to review our pool of 52 items for content validity and the extent to which our items reflected our definition of career plateau. First, two graduate students majoring in psychometrics were invited to select items according to the definition of career plateau with the authors and 30 items were identified. Second, we asked another

10 graduate students majoring in organizational behavior and one professor in the field of OB to appraise the clarity, conciseness, semantic accuracy and unidimentionality of each item which resulted in identifying 17 items for career plateau measurement. Having addressed the validity and reliability, we next examined the psychometric properties of our instrument.

3.2 Procedures and Participants

The survey was administered in four companies located in Wuhan, mainland China. The participating companies were from four industries: electric power, wine-making, design and information technology. We believe that sampling from different industries will enhance the external generalizability of our instrument. Before commencing the survey, the first author contacted managers of the HR department or participating department in the four companies. Then, we mailed each manager a large packet with questionnaires. A cover letter was attached to explain the purpose of our research, provide guidelines to distribute and complete the questionnaire, and ensure research confidentiality. The managers were asked to hand out the questionnaires to the employees who volunteered to participate. One week after mailing the packets, the researchers collected the questionnaires from the respondents in person.

In this survey, 290 questionnaires were distributed, and 259 were returned, a return percentage of 89.31%. Finally, after deleting those with missing data, we obtained 219 valid questionnaires, yielding a respondent percentage of 75.52%. Of the sample, 56.62% of the employees were male, with an average age of 29.06 years old and tenure of 3.6 years. With regards to their educational level, 62.1% had at least a bachelor's degree. 23.74% of them worked in an administrative department, 57.99% in a technology department and 18.27% in a supporting department. 32.88% of the respondents were from a state-owned enterprise, 12.33% from a joint venture enterprise and 54.79% from a private enterprise.

3.3 Explorative Factor Analysis

Using SPSS, a principal factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed to examine the factor structure of our instrument. Factors with an Eigenvalue of

greater than 1 were retained. After removing the confounding item "In this company, I have reached the highest rank within my ability", all the remaining items with a factor loading of greater than 0.4, loaded on three factors as hypothesized (see Table 1).

Table 1 Results from the Factor Analysis of the Career Plateau Scale

Item wording	F1	F2	F3
Job content plateau			
13. The current job can further enrich my job skills (R)	0.86		
11. I can further learn something new in my current job (R)	0.83		
5. I always have access to new things related to my job (R)	0.77		
2. The current job can further broaden my horizons (R)	0.75		
8. My job requires me to keep learning new knowledge (R)	0.74		
15. For me, my work has become routine	0.49		0.45
Inclusive plateau			
17. The supervisor gives me more power (R)		0.74	
12.The supervisor always puts me in charge of certain crucial assignments (R)		0.72	
9. I always take tasks with more responsibility (R)		0.68	
3. I have opportunities to gain more rights to speak up (R)	0.42	0.62	
6. I have opportunities to get more organization resources (R)		0.61	
14. I have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making of the company (R)		0.60	
Hierarchical plateau			
4. The opportunities for upward movement are limited			0.85
7. I am unlikely to obtain a much higher position			0.78
10. The likelihood that I will get ahead is less			0.78
1. I can get opportunities for promotion from my supervisor (R)			0.58
Eigenvalue	3.94	3.12	2.91
Variance (%)	24.60	20.00	18.21
Cumulative Variance (%)	24.60	44.60	62.81
Cronbach's α	0.88	0.82	0.81

Note: $N = 219$; Items are translated from the Chinese survey.

After analyzing the content of each factor, we labeled Factor 1 as "Job content plateau", Factor 2 as "Inclusive plateau" and Factor 3 as "Hierarchical plateau". Altogether, the three factors explain 62.81% of the variance, among which Factor 1 (Eigenvalue=3.94) explains 24.60%, Factor 2 (Eigenvalue=3.12) 20.00%, and Factor 3 (Eigenvalue = 2.91) 18.21%. All the three dimensions have good reliability. Cronbach's alphas were all above 0.70, ranging from 0.81 to 0.88.

However, our results suggest that there was cross-loading on Item 3 and Item 15. To ensure the unidimensionality of the item, we revised the wording of these two items. Thus, Item 3 was modified to "I have opportunities to gain more rights to speak up" and Item 15 was revised to "For me, my work has become routine". Finally, after deletion and revision, we obtained our career plateau scale of 16 items.

4 Study 2

4.1 Procedure and Participants

The second study was an opportunity to further examine the three-factor structure, the concurrent validity and reliability of the scale and test our hypotheses with a new sample. Participants in this study were from 4 companies in mainland China, 2 located in Wuhan, 1 in Changsha and 1 in Shenzhen. They were from the steel, communications, pharmaceutical and information technology industries. All questionnaires were distributed and collected using the same procedures as Study 1. In total, 400 questionnaires were randomly handed out, 309 were returned (a return percentage of 77.25%) and 288 were valid (a valid return percentage of 72.00%). 61.46% of the sample were male, with an average age of 31.02 years old, organizational tenure of 3.90 and work tenure of 6.9 years. Employees with at least a bachelor's degree predominated the sample (64.23%), and 36.11% were from the administrative department, 47.22% from the technology department and 16.67% from supporting departments. 39.24% of employees were from a state-owned enterprise, 20.48% from a joint-venture enterprise and 40.28% were from a private enterprise.

4.2 Measures

As all the dependent and independent variables in the current study were perceptual and attitudinal constructs, they were self-assessed by the employees. Therefore, common method bias may be a concern (Podsakoff, Mackenzien, Lee, et al., 2003; Podsakoff and Organ, 1986) for potential artificial inflation of the findings. Following Podsakoff et al. (2003) and Seibert, Kraimer and Liden (2001), we used four techniques to reduce potential CMB. First, all the instruments were anchored on different points and ranged from 4 to 6. Second,

the response format of each scale varied. Some were about "agreement", while others were about the extent to which the description fit the facts. Third, items with the same response formats were separated. Fourth, items assessing independence and dependence were separated and placed in different sections of the questionnaire.

4.2.1 Career Plateau

Career plateau was measured with the 16-item scale developed in Study 1. Scale scores were computed by averaging across scale items, with a higher score indicating a higher level of career plateau (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree).

4.2.2 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction was assessed with the shortened Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (Fieds, 2004). The instrument consists of 20 items divided into two dimensions, namely intrinsic job satisfaction and extrinsic job satisfaction. In this study, the Cronbach's α for the 12 items measuring intrinsic job satisfaction was 0.84, and that for the 8 items measuring extrinsic job satisfaction was 0.82. A 6-point scale was used with answers ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 6 (very satisfied).

4.2.3 Affective Commitment

Affective commitment was measured with a short version developed by Porter et al. (1974), whose generalizability in the Chinese context has been validated (Long, 2002). A 4-point scale was used with answers ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's α was 0.91.

4.2.4 Control Variables

Previous studies showed that affective commitment were affected by socioeconomic variables (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002), so gender, age, educational level, organizational tenure, career path and type of

enterprise were controlled for in the current study.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

With the new sample, confirmatory factor analysis conducted with Mplus7.0 was used to examine whether the three-factor structure of the career plateau scale could be replicated. The results of the CFA indicated the three-factor model fit best with the data. All items loaded significantly on the respective dimensions of career plateau ($p < 0.01$), and factor loadings ranged from 0.56 to 0.84. In summary, the results of the CFA supported the three-factor structure of the career plateau scale.

Table 2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Three-factor Career Plateau Scale

Model	χ^2	d*f*	χ^2/d*f*	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI
Three-factor model	303.23	101	3.00	0.08	0.09	0.92
Two-factor model[a]	690.73	103	6.71	0.14	0.10	0.83
One-factor model	1087.24	104	10.45	0.19	0.11	0.72
Null model	2511.84	120	20.93			

Note: $N = 288$; [a] Job content plateau and inclusive plateau were merged into one factor.

4.3.2 Preliminary Analysis

To estimate the distinctness of the assessed variables, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses with Mplus7.0. The results showed the hypothesized six-factor model, distinguishing hierarchical plateau, job content plateau, inclusive plateau, extrinsic satisfaction, intrinsic satisfaction, and affective commitment, was a better fit for the data ($\chi^2_{(930)} = 2{,}066.40$, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.90, SRMR = 0.08) than more parsimonious models: a five-factor model in which extrinsic and intrinsic satisfaction were combined into overall job satisfaction ($\chi^2_{(935)} = 2{,}101.53$, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.81, SRMR = 0.09); a four-factor model in which extrinsic satisfaction, intrinsic satisfaction and affective commitment were combined into one factor ($\chi^2_{(939)} = 2{,}273.71$, RMSEA = 0.70, CFI = 0.78, SRMR = 0.10); and a single factor model with all variables loaded on a single factor

($\chi^2_{(945)}=3{,}172.13$, RMSEA = 0.10, CFI = 0.62, SRMR = 0.10).

The means, standard deviations and correlations of the interest variables are provided in Table 3.

Table 3 Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations

Variables	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5
1. Hierarchical plateau	3.56	1.31					
2. Job content plateau	2.82	1.10	0.40**				
3. Inclusion plateau	3.45	1.10	0.48**	0.64**			
4. Intrinsic job satisfaction	2.79	0.42	–0.36**	–0.64**	–0.65**		
5. Extrinsic job satisfaction	2.62	0.49	–0.28**	–0.54**	–0.52**	0.75**	
6. Affective commitment	2.76	0.62	–0.27**	–0.58**	–0.48**	0.67**	0.74**

Note: *N* ranged from 271 to 286. $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$.

4.3.3 Hypotheses Test

Hypothesis 1 maintained that career plateau was a three-dimensional concept. The results of the EFA and CFA support our hypothesis. In Hypothesis 2, we predicted that the three dimensions of career plateau were negatively related to affective commitment. Table 3 shows that correlations between the three dimensions and affective commitment are all negative and significant at a level of .01. These results appear to support Hypothesis 2. However, zero-order correlation analysis did not exclude covariance between variables, resulting in a potentially biased conclusion. To obtain a robust and unbiased result, we utilized a hierarchical regression analysis to test Hypothesis 2. In the third column of Table 4, the results suggest that hierarchical plateau is significantly and negatively related with affective commitment ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.01$), when socioeconomic variables are controlled. However, the effect of hierarchical plateau on affective commitment is not significant ($\beta = -0.11$, $p > 0.01$), when job content plateau and inclusive plateau are included in the model. However, whether correlation analysis or hierarchical regression is utilized, the relationship between job content plateau, inclusive plateau and affective commitment indicates that job content plateau and inclusive plateau are related to affective commitment. Thus, Hypothesis 2a is not supported, and Hypothesis 2b and Hypothesis 2c are supported.

Mediation has become a central topic in behavioral science research in recent years, and a large and growing literature test mediation hypotheses. However, to date, few authors have focused on the simultaneous testing of multiple indirect effects (Preacher and Hays, 2008). There are several advantages to testing a single multiple mediation model in lieu of separate simple mediation models. First, it is possible to determine to what extent specific M variables mediate the X-Y association, conditional on the presence of other mediators in the model. Second, the likelihood of parameter bias due to omitted variables is reduced, when multiple putative mediators are included into a multiple mediation model (Preacher and Hays, 2008). To examine the multiple mediation effects of career plateau on affective commitment through intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction, we used the multiple mediation macro developed by Preacher and Hays (2008).

Table 4 Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Predictors	M1	M2	M3	M4
Step1: Control variables[a]				
ΔR^2	0.19^{**}	-	-	
Step2: Hierarchical plateau		-0.29^{**}	-0.10	-0.05
ΔR^2		0.07^{**}		
Step3: Job content plateau			-0.49^{**}	-0.42^{**}
ΔR^2			0.19^{**}	
Step4: Inclusion plateau				-0.16^{*}
ΔR^2				0.01^{*}

Note. *N* varies from 234 to 259; Standardized coefficients are reported for the final step in each model; [a]control variables include age, organizational tenure, gender, education, career path and types of enterprise; The latter four variables are dummied; There is no multicollinearity. VIF varies from 1.23 to 2.78. $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$.

Table 5 shows that the indirect and direct effect of hierarchical plateau on affective commitment is not significant, which corroborated our prior result. As shown in Table 5, the effect of inclusive plateau on affective commitment is fully mediated through intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction. The fourth and sixth column of Table 4 reveal that the direct effect of job content plateau on affective commitment is significant ($c'=0.12$, $p<0.05$), but bias corrected bootstrapping indicates the 95% interval of direct effect is [−0.16, 0.01], including zero. Considering that bootstrapping provides the most powerful, reasonable and

robust parameter estimates (Preacher and Hays, 2008), we believe the two mediators fully mediate the relationship between job content plateau and affective commitment. To compare the mediation power of intrinsic job satisfaction and extrinsic job satisfaction, we conducted a contrast analysis. The results demonstrate that the specific indirect effect of job content plateau and inclusion on affective commitment through intrinsic job satisfaction is greater than through extrinsic job satisfaction. BC99%CI for the contrasts are [−.05, −.02] and [−0.08, −0.03], respectively. Thus, we conclude that intrinsic job satisfaction imposes greater mediation on the job content plateau, inclusive plateau -affective commitment association.

Table 5 Mediation Role of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Satisfaction

Paths	Coefficients			Effects		Bootstrapping	
	a1	b1	C'	Specific indirect effects	Direct effects	BC95%	CI
HP-IJS-AC	–0.02	0.43**	-	–0.01	-	–0.09,	0.01
HP-EJS-AC	0.03	0.32**	-	0.01	-	–0.08,	0.02
HP-AC	-	-	–0.04	-	–0.04	–0.02,	0.02
CP-IJS-AC	–0.22**	0.41**	-	–0.09**	-	–0.11,	–0.07
CP-EJS-AC	–0.21**	0.35**	-	–0.07**	-	–0.08,	–0.05
CP-AC	-	-	–12*	-	–0.12*	–0.16,	0.01
IP-IJS-AC	–0.32**	0.37**	-	–0.12**	-	–0.18,	–0.08
IP-EJS-AC	–0.14**	0.35**	-	–0.05*	-	–0.10,	–0.04
IP-AC	-	-	0.07	-	–0.07	–0.15,	0.03

Note. [a] HP=Hierarchical Plateau, AC = Affective Commitment, IJS=Intrinsic Job Satisfaction, EJS = Extrinsic Job Satisfaction, CP = Job Content Plateau, IC = Inclusive Plateau; [b] control variables include age, organizational tenure, gender, education, career path and types of enterprise. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

5 Discussion

5.1 Main Findings

Based on Schein's (1971) cone-shaped organizational mobility model, this paper proposes inclusive plateau as the third dimension of career plateau and examines its validity with samples from China. To investigate the psychological mechanism underlying the career plateau-affective commitment association, we

examined the multiple mediation of intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction with guidance from social exchange theory and need-satisfaction models. Our findings provide new insights into career plateau.

First, in this research, with two separate samples we demonstrate that inclusive plateau is a valid dimension of career plateau that accounts for extra variance in outcomes. Hierarchical plateau and job content plateau in Bardwick's (1986) classification and the widely-used two-dimension scale (Millian, 1992) coincided with vertical and horizontal mobility, respectively, in organizational career paths. In this sense, centralized mobility was neglected in this scale, which left leeway for this third dimension. Our work bridges this gap by supplementing the career plateau instrument with an additional dimension reflecting individual stagnation in inclusion within the organization. The dataset from China further verifies the generalizability of career plateau in a non-Western cultural context. Though the new dimension of inclusive plateau was proposed and validated in the context of China, we believe that the inclusive plateau exists in Western organizations as well. For example, the study by O'Hara et al. (1994) indicated centrality was the third dimension of intra-organization career movement, with a sample of western employees. Like the Chinese employees in our sample, western employees may also have more informal power and influence when they have access to the center of power and resources (Schein, 1971; Pearce and Randel, 2004). However, the inclusive plateau as the third dimension of career plateauing needs to be replicated with western samples. Moreover, given that the effects of career plateau on outcomes is inconsistent in many studies, we hope our new scale will provide insights into this line of research.

Second, this article simultaneously examines the relationship between the three dimensions of career plateau and affective commitment. Many studies found that hierarchical plateau was negatively related to employees' affective commitment (for a review, see Xie and Long, 2005). However, Table 4 illustrates that hierarchical plateau was not related to affective commitment, when job content plateau and inclusive plateau were included into the hierarchical regression model. Because the conclusions regarding the relationship between hierarchical plateau and affective commitment in previous research were reached in the absence of other dimensions of career plateau, our results shed light on the relationship between hierarchical plateau and outcomes such as affective commitment, turnover intention, etc.

Third, despite a plethora of evidence substantiating the negative relationship between hierarchical plateau and negative work attitudes (Chao, 1990; Jung and Tak, 2008; Lapalme, Tremblay and Simard, 2009; Lentz and Allen, 2009; McCleese and Eby, 2006), behaviors and performance (Heilmann, Holt and Rilovick, 2008; Lentz and Allen, 2009; Tremblay, Roger and Toulouse 1995), little is still known about how it occurs. Based on social exchange theory and need-satisfaction models, we examined the psychological mechanism of the effects of career plateau on employees' affective commitment. Our findings reveal that job satisfaction is an important variable that can explain the relationship between job content plateau, inclusive plateau and affective commitment. Moreover, a career plateau can exert a greater negative effect on intrinsic job satisfaction, resulting in the lowering of an employee's affective commitment.

5.2 Practical Implications

Our research also provides managers with some practical insights. First, it shows that employees' career development in the organization has many aspects, such as vertical promotion, knowledge learning, skill enhancement and inclusion. Our research suggests that besides limited promotion opportunities and the staleness of job content, the lack of perceived organizational centrality is also an important form of career plateau. Managers can take measures such as empowerment, job autonomy, participation in decision making, etc., to increase employees' perceived informal power in the organization. Second, the effects of hierarchical plateau on employees' work attitudes may be limited. When it comes to career plateau, managers immediately think of hierarchical plateau. Our research reminds managers to pay attention to job content plateau and inclusive plateau, as our findings indicate that job content plateau and inclusive plateau could exert more effects on job attitudes such as job satisfaction (especially intrinsic job satisfaction) and affective commitment. This is of benefit to managers, as hierarchical plateau is inevitable for the majority of employees, but job content plateau and inclusive plateau can be avoided.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Like all studies, there are limitations to this research. First, although we took

measures to minimize common method bias including separating items for independent and dependent variables into different sections of the survey instrument, using different question formats for each set of variables and placing independent and dependent variables into different sections of the survey, measures were self-reported from a single source which may introduce common method bias. Second, it was not possible to make inferences concerning causal direction for the paths tested in our model, owing to its cross-sectional design. Though need-satisfaction models provided a strong theoretical foundation for our model, future research may use a longitudinal study design to examine the relationship between career plateau and affective commitment via job satisfaction. Third, to some extent, our sample from China limits the generalizability of our three-dimension career plateau scale. It is necessary for scholars from other backgrounds, especially those from Western cultures, to examine the content and structural validity of our instrument. We hope researchers from other cultures can validate our three-dimension instrument in different cultural contexts and take contextual and cultural factors into account when replicating and examining our research.

6 Conclusions

To conclude, by extending the meaning of career plateau, the present study investigated the three-dimension structure of career plateau and the effects of the three dimensions of plateau on affective commitment of Chinese employees. Through two studies, we found support for the three-factor (i.e., hierarchical, job content and inclusive plateau) structure of career plateau in China, and the mediation of job satisfaction on the career plateau- affective commitment association. Drawing on these findings, we suggest that managers should focus on the multi-faceted nature of an employee's career plateau, especially on the job content plateau and inclusive plateau aspects.

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